QL
692
K4K43X
BIRD

Kenya Birds

Volume 1, Number 2 December 1992

SMITHSONIAN
JAN 2 0 2000
LIBRARIES

A joint publication of the Department of Ornithology, National Museums of Kenya and the Kenya Section of the International Council for Bird Preservation.

Editors: Leon Bennun, Cecilia Gichuki and John Fanshawe

Department of Ornithology, National Museums of Kenya, P. O. Box 40658, Nairobi

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Editorial

Welcome to the second issue of *Kenya Birds*, and thanks to all those who have written in with comments, suggestions, notes and records. We very much appreciate your support.

This issue focuses on birds in and around the Nairobi area. This is probably the 'best-watched' region in the country, but it contains great riches. With habitats ranging from dry bushland to highland forest all within a half-hour's drive of the city, Nairobi and environs contain an astonishing diversity of species. We cannot do the Nairobi area justice in a single issue, so if you have a favourite birding site near the city, write in and share it with us next year.

In this issue you will also find a subscription form for 1993. Please take the time now to return this with your subs to ensure that you receive the next two issues. We will continue to send *Kenya Birds* free to bona-fide students who write in requesting it, but the costs of producing the magazine mean that we must ask others to subscribe.

We will carry news in the next *Kenya Birds* about ICBP's Birdwatch '93, a giant bird event that will involve more than a million people around the globe on the weekend of 9-10 October. In Kenya, we plan to see how many species can be seen in 24 hours by pooling the effort of teams based all over the country. Everyone can take part — so start polishing up your binoculars and revising your cisticolas for a weekend of fun and conservation fund-raising.

Subscription Rates (1 Year)

	EANHS members	Non-members
Kenya	KSh 120/-	KSh 200/-
Elsewhere (air mail)	UK £6.00	UK £7.50

(Subscribers outside Kenya may pay in any convertible currency.)

Students: Full-time students who are EANHS members may receive *Kenya Birds* free. They should write giving details of their institution, course and completion date with an endorsement and stamp from their supervisor or headmaster.

Please address all correspondence to: The Editors, **Kenya Birds**, Department of Ornithology, National Museums of Kenya, P. O. Box 40658 Nairobi, Kenya.

Front cover illustration: Hartlaub's Bustard *Eupodotis hartlaubi* from a vignette by Ber van Perlo. Typesetting and layout: Graecon Ink. Printed in Kenya by AMREF, Wilson Airport, P. O. Box 30125, Nairobi.

News from Kenya and abroad

Department of Ornithology

Tana Delta survey

Since May 1992 Oliver Nasirwa and field assistant Kuria Ndung'u have been conducting a survey of waterbirds in the Tana River delta area, funded by the Netherlands Government. Their preliminary results demonstrate both the richness and the fragility of this wetland system. The problems of the area, which has been proposed as a National Wetlands Reserve and a Ramsar site, are complex. A giant mechanised irrigation project to produce rice is already underway upstream; a large new road associated with the project, and apparently designed without any consideration of the environmental consequences, has prevented the flow of flood water, killing off riverine forest either through inundation or desiccation. Further south, farmers have constructed their own barrage, cutting off the flow of water from the main river into the delta area. Kon-Dertu has in turn leased a portion to a company called Coastal Aquaculture, which plans to start prawn farming.

Against this unpromising background, and with further difficulties caused by the general insecurity in the area, Nasirwa and Ndung'u are mapping bird distributions in the various wetlands in and around the delta. Their work is pinpointing particularly important sites and conservation issues, and will help in drawing up appropriate management plans whether or not the delta is eventually gazetted as a reserve.

Arabuko-Sokoke project winds up

After three years of activity, the joint ICBP-NMK Arabuko-Sokoke Forest Conservation project (see *Kenya Birds* 1(1)) came to an end this December. The future for Sokoke looks bright: from now on the forest will be managed jointly by the Forest Department and the Kenya Wildlife Service under a Memorandum of Understanding between the two institutions. Other good news is that many conservation activities will continue uninterrupted under a new project, with the support of the British Overseas Development Administration.

KWS is to take charge of ecotourism in the forest, and a full-time warden is now in place. As well as the recently laid-out nature trails, visitors can make use of a tourist centre at Gede Forest Station and the services of several trained guides.

As well as managing the project's activities, Project Officer John Fanshawe has throughout been collecting data on bird communities in the forest, with an

especial focus on the effects of disturbance in the *Brachystegia* woodland. John now returns to Oxford University to analyse these data for his doctoral thesis. Despite his busy schedule at the coast John has been very active on the Kenyan ornithological scene and he will be greatly missed. The Department wishes him all the best with his write-up. — *Leon Bennun, Dept. Ornithology.*

Forest birds of the Shimba Hills

The Ornithology Department forest team (Leon Bennun, Edward Waiyaki, Patrick Gichuki and George Amutete) was in Shimba Hills during October 1992. We surveyed Mkongani Forest, in the south-west of the reserve; Longomagandi Forest, a small patch in the reserve's highest central part; and Maluganji Forest to the north.

Particularly interesting was the discovery of the threatened Spotted Ground Thrush and Sokoke Pipit in Mkongani Forest. Both this forest and Longomagandi also held surprisingly large numbers of the rare East Coast Akalat: we captured and ringed a total of twelve. We found a good variety of other coastal birds in Mkongani, including near-threatened or candidate Red Data book species such as Southern Banded Snake Eagle, Fischer's Turaco, Green-headed Oriole, Tiny Greenbul, Chestnut-fronted Helmet Shrike, Uluguru Violet-backed Sunbird (one male was caught) and Plain-backed Sunbird. Because of its bird species diversity and its relatively large size, Mkongani is evidently a priority area for conservation effort.

Ornithologists do not seem to have visited Maluganji Forest before. Compared to Mkongani, this is a small and relatively dry forest patch, at lower altitude. Thicket dominated by *Cynometra*, *Terminalia* and *Brachylaena* covers the northern half of it, supplanted to the south by taller *Cynometra* forest with cycads. The elegant, pale-barked, evenly spaced *Cynometra* trees are very attractive to look at. However, the forest appears to contain rather few bird species, perhaps partly because the understory is extremely open.

In Arabuko-Sokoke Forest, the endangered Sokoke Scops Owl is confined to very similar *Cynometra* forest. It was thus exciting to hear an owl calling in Maluganji that sounded as though it could be this species. Alas: a visit at the start of December with Sokoke experts John Fanshawe and David Ngala revealed that it was only a Barred Owlet, which appears to call rather differently in Maluganji than elsewhere on the coast. This call is a repeated whistled hoot, like that of the Sokoke Scops Owl, but less even and regular. Birders beware!

The Shimba Hills forests are of great interest for trees and butterflies as well as birds. Commercial logging has taken place in some areas in the past, but right now the main threat to the forests seems to be their elephant populations. In all the sites we visited, elephants were both numerous and very bad tempered. This

made fieldwork difficult; but a more serious problem is the damage that the animals are doing to some forest areas. Parts of Maluganji looked as though they had been hit by a hurricane, with every second or third tree knocked over. Debarking of trees and killing of saplings is also extensive. The Shimba elephants are notorious crop raiders, and a plan to protect shambas by fencing off most of the reserve can only increase the already considerable pressure on the forest. The Kenya Wildlife Service will need some imaginative planning to circumvent this problem and protect the forests' biodiversity.

Sokoke Scops Owl study to start

From January 1993, MSc student Munir Virani will begin a nine-month study of the endangered Sokoke Scops Owl. Remarkably little is known about the biology of this bird, which is confined to a small area of *Cynometra* forest in Arabuko-Sokoke. Munir plans to look at population size, activity patterns, feeding and breeding behaviour, in an attempt to understand the reasons for the birds' very specialised habitat requirements. The study, which is supported by The Peregrine Fund USA, will involve radio-tracking of marked birds.

Meanwhile, MSc student Gitogo Maina has finished his field work in Baringo, where he has been investigating the effects of land rehabilitation on bird communities. Much of the land around Baringo has been turned into 'wooded desert' by overgrazing and fuel-wood cutting; for some years now the Baringo Fuel and Fodder Project has been rehabilitating selected areas. The land is first cleared mechanically, then planted with grass and fast-growing tree species. Electric fences keep these rehabilitated 'fields' safe from goats and cattle until the local community decides to make use of them.

Gitogo's data are not yet analysed, but the preliminary results show a much higher density and diversity of birds in the rehabilitated areas. However, it seems that some of these species may still depend on large old trees outside the fields for roosting in.

Peregrine Fund field course

Around a dozen bird-of-prey enthusiasts, including students and University lecturers, took part in a course on raptor biology and conservation at Elsamere Field Studies Centre from 6–8 July 1992. The course was organised by The Peregrine Fund USA and presented by Rick Watson of the PFund and local raptor expert Simon Thomsett. Elsamere provided an ideal setting, and a memorable afternoon was spent observing the varied birds of prey of Hell's Gate National Park, including a pair of Lanners hunting the swifts coming to roost. The course is part of a joint raptor conservation project that the PFund is carrying out with the Department of Ornithology.

The project has also produced the first in a series of educational booklets, 'Living with Wildlife', that will be distributed through the Wildlife Clubs of Kenya. The booklet, written and illustrated by Simon Thomsett, looks at owls: a much misunderstood group of birds.

Mass death of waterbirds at Dandora

The Dandora Sewage Treatment Works are well known among birdwatchers. The works consist of an extensive system (recently greatly expanded) of treatment ponds that shelter a variety of waterbirds. At the right time of year if is a good place to see large numbers of Palaearctic duck.

On 19 October two officials from the Nairobi City Commission Water and Sewage Department reported that they had seen many dead and dying birds while carrying out their routine fortnightly water quality sampling. They brought in a dying Red-knobbed Coot to the Department as an example.

A short survey on 20 October showed that most of the sick birds were Red-knobbed Coots and ducks of several species. The birds were weak and unable to fly away when approached. Around fifty dead birds were seen on the ponds.

Within the next few days the mortality rate rose sharply and birds of many species were affected. Help was sought from scientists at the Kenya Wildlife Service and Kabete Veterinary Laboratories to analyse samples of water and carcasses. It was noted that birds were dying mainly in the new ponds, which had been operational for around four months, and in the ponds with the 'cleanest' water — just before release into the river.

A report by Dr Githaiga Kamau of Kenya Wildlife Service pinned the problem on bacterial infection. A variety of enterotoxic bacteria were found in high concentration in the birds' bodies and in the sewage sludge from the ponds. The birds that were examined showed signs of extensive internal bleeding.

Bacterial infections have often been responsible for mass deaths of waterbirds elsewhere in the world. However, this is the first time that the problem has been reported from Dandora. According to Dr Kamau's report, a number of factors may have been responsible, in particular the newness of the ponds and the low water levels at the time, which caused stagnation and encouraged the growth of bacteria and toxic blue-green algae. — *Edward Waiyaki, Dept. Ornithology.*

Kenya Crane and Wetland Workshop

Wetlands are under threat all over Africa, and one of the groups of animals most at risk as a result is the cranes. East Africa has the largest concentration of Grey Crowned Cranes on the continent, and for the last six years the Department has been involved in work on the biology and conservation of this species. A clear result of the first few years' work was the realisation that the rural farming

communities could play a major role in the conservation of wetlands and cranes. Thus in 1990 the Crane Project widened its scope to include socio-economic aspects of conservation and management of wetlands as bird habitats.

At Saiwa Swamp National Park a sustainable use system is being developed. The project has already helped the local community to set up several environmental conservation groups, dealing with issues such as tree planting, fish ponds and soil conservation. As part of this programme, a workshop was held at Saiwa from 22–24 October 1992.

Participants included representatives of regional NGOs and government institutions, biology teachers and Wildlife Club patrons from local schools, local fish and cattle farmers, social workers, local administrators and extension officers. International crane experts George Archibald (International Crane Foundation) and Emil Urban (Augusta College, Georgia) took part as well.

Over 300 local delegates attended during the day, and another 200 (including children) watched conservation films during the evening. Short talks and presentations were given by around twelve invited speakers.

Comments after the workshop have made it clear that much wetland destruction is unintentional, and that people have a strong desire to safeguard the wetlands and the animals living in them. Basic education on how to use wetlands sustainably is extremely important. — *Cecilia Gichuki, Dept. Ornithology.*

Crowned Eagle — *Simon Thomsett*

ICBP Kenya Section

Crowned Eagle hide goes up in Ololua Forest

The Crowned Eagle is Africa's most powerful bird of prey. This forest predator hunts small antelope, hyrax and monkeys almost exclusively. Crowned Eagles reproduce very slowly. They reach sexual maturity at about six years of age, and produce a maximum of one chick every two years.

Most of what we know about the biology of these birds comes from studies at two nest sites, carried out by the late Leslie Brown over a period of more than 30 years. Both of these nest sites still exist, one in Embu,

the other in Ololua Forest on the outskirts of Nairobi.

Crowned Eagles need large areas of forest with abundant wildlife. Because they breed so slowly, they cannot recover their populations if persecuted. The species is thus particularly vulnerable. A combination of deforestation, planting of exotic trees, removal of prey species and direct persecution has caused a dramatic decline of Crowned Eagles throughout Kenya.

How does one make the public aware that this magnificent eagle requires our attention and help if it is to survive? Obviously one has to bring the subject to the people, but this could be difficult, and frightening for the shy forest eagles. Fortunately the pair of Crowned Eagles nesting in Ololua have a long history of tolerating observers near to their nesting tree. At present, this is a tall *Manilkara* soaring above the Mbagathi river at the forest's edge. Some time back, a hide was built in a Cape Chestnut tree nearby, and the eagles now use the old platform as a place to eat their food.

Capitalising on this extraordinarily bold pair, ICBP Kenya and the Peregrine Fund Inc., working in association with the Departments of Ornithology and Education of the National Museums of Kenya, financed and constructed a large hide that towers up through the forest canopy. The hide lets visitors to the Ololua Nature Trail look directly down onto the nest. It is about 12 m high and can accommodate five persons at a time.

The hide was built in one week during a period when the chick (now flying) was almost independent of its parents. The chick was recorded at the site every day of the hide's construction, and the adult pair has also been regularly seen.

Presently the hide is being fitted with one-way glass and educational material. As well as being able to see the nest and the eagles, visitors will have the chance to learn about the birds' biology and their forest habitat. When the next breeding season begins it will be very exciting to be able to watch the pair tend their young from the hide. We hope that those who share this experience may become concerned for the future of the eagles in an increasingly uncertain and insecure environment. — *Simon Thomsett, P.O. Box 42818, Nairobi.*

Kenya Airways halts transport of wild-caught birds

Under intense local and international pressure, Kenya Airways has finally ceased the transportation of wild-caught birds on all its routes. Kenya Airways managing director Brian Davies made the announcement on 30 October 1992, following demonstrations outside the airline's European offices. The protests were organised by the Environmental Investigation Agency, who have been spearheading the international campaign to stop the wild bird trade.

Our congratulations to KA, who join more than 100 airlines world-wide that now refuse to carry wild-caught birds. The trade is a major conservation problem

and a cause of appalling suffering for millions of birds each year, the majority of which die before reaching their destination.

Kenya does not itself export birds, but has of late become a major transit point for cargoes from Tanzania and Cameroon. In an incident in September 1992 around 6,000 birds were confiscated from the airport by KWS and KSPCA officials. The birds, which were packed in appalling conditions, had entered the country illegally and without proper documentation. Despite the dedicated efforts of the KSPCA, many birds died; the rest were released after veterinary tests. It is hoped that Kenya Airways' new policy will put a stop to this sort of incident, but concerned organisations will continue to monitor the situation.

EANHS Ornithological Sub-committee

Migrant ringing at Ngulia, November–December 1992

Palaearctic passerines were caught and ringed as usual this year at the Ngulia floodlights. Activity was limited to a single new moon period, with ringers at the lodge for just 16 days. The team was smaller than in previous years, so their capacity to deal with large catches was more limited. Despite this, 5057 Palaearctic birds were ringed in all between 20 November and 5 December. Also, two Marsh Warblers with German rings were controlled (recaptured). One of these is known to have been ringed in Oman during the previous spring passage.

Ringing success at Ngulia depends largely on weather conditions. Much of Tsavo was already green this year from early rain at the end of October, along with further heavy showers in mid-November. During the ringing period, however, the rains seem to have stalled and there were almost no showers at Ngulia — even on misty nights. During 20–25 November, conditions were ideal for catching, with persistent mist and birds around the lights every night. The small team of two to four people worked almost non-stop. More personnel, including a group from Nairobi Museum, arrived on 26 November, but thereafter the night conditions proved less favourable. Mist brought birds on 28 and 29 November, but then a series of unproductive starry nights set in. Mist finally returned just two hours before dawn on the last night, 5 December, bringing a final 500 birds to the nets.

As always at Ngulia, the three main species were Marsh Warbler (1598 ringed), Whitethroat (1310) and Sprosser (1244). Eurasian Swallow (307, mostly caught feeding during the morning) and River Warbler (178) followed. Other species which did relatively well this year were Olive-tree Warbler (34), Barred Warbler (36), Spotted Flycatcher (62) and Red-backed Shrike (39). It was a poor year for nightjars, with only six Eurasian, as well as three Dusky and three Donaldson-Smith's, captured. Numbers of Harlequin Quail were also low,

probably reflecting the lack of rainfall. A variety of birds of prey is usually seen at Ngulia, but this was again a particularly poor year. The only migrants were occasional Steppe Eagles, one Lesser Spotted Eagle, two Amur Falcons on 25 November and several sightings of Eurasian Sparrowhawk (perhaps all of the same bird). Again, the lack of showers, which stimulate emergences of alate termites, was perhaps to blame.

There were no new migrants for the ringing list, but a Somali Long-billed Crombec, trapped in the bush, was the first ringed at the Lodge. — *David Pearson, Browses, Sibton, Saxmundham, Suffolk IP17 2JH, UK.*

***Scopus* 16(1)**

The most recent issue of *Scopus* (July 1992) contains papers on the Indian House Crow; Blue-breasted Kingfishers in Ethiopia; migrants in western Uganda; wintering waders at Lake Turkana; and birds in Queen Elizabeth National Park, along the Nile in Northern Sudan, and in Dar es Salaam. There are also five short communications. (See the inside back cover for subscription details.)

Kenya Wetlands Working Group

Ewaso Ngiro report released

The previous issue of *Kenya Birds* discussed the planned hydro-power and irrigation developments on the southern Ewaso Ngiro River, and their potential impacts on flamingos breeding at Lake Natron. Now Knight Piésold, the consultants to the project, have released their long-awaited report on the hydrological impacts of the scheme. This is fundamental to understanding what the other environmental effects might be.

The report is long and complex, but certain features stand out. The overall scheme now being considered is on a smaller scale than in the original plans. Water will be transferred from the Amala River (in the Mara River catchment) to the Ewaso Ngiro near the source of the two rivers in the Trans-Mara forest. This will be a run-of-river, gravity-fed transfer, thus avoiding the necessity of flooding forest, and will operate only when the level of the Amala is high. The report points out that this is one of the few opportunities to divert water from the relatively wet Lake Victoria catchment to the relatively dry Rift Valley.

This water will then be held in a series of dams at Oletukat (large), Leshota (medium) and Oldorko (small). The total surface area will be around 10 km^2, compared to the 30 km^2 originally planned. These dams will be used for hydro-power generation. Environmental issues here include the large muddy areas that will appear when the dam levels are low, and the maintenance of flow in river channels by-passed by the turbines' tail-race tunnels. The quality of water

emerging from the dams is also a concern: it will be low in oxygen and high in hydrogen sulphide.

The report says that complex and unpredictable changes are likely in the floodplain north of Lake Natron, which is already in a state of 'dynamic equilibrium'. Overall river flows will be higher than before (thanks to the extra water from Amala), and more reliable; however, large peaks will occur more rarely. Thus, while a new wetland of about 800 ha will probably form in part of the floodplain, the rest will need to be artificially flooded from time to time by maintaining peak power generation for an extended period. Levels of silt will be greatly reduced, which may also affect the floodplain ecology.

In Lake Natron itself, the present freshwater swamp in the north will increase in size, and a permanent freshwater lagoon will form on the lake. The size of the lagoon will fluctuate between about 45–65 km^2. The lagoon is likely to cover one small flamingo breeding colony, but the main colonies in the central and southern parts of the lake will not be affected. The report notes that flamingo activity will need to be carefully monitored: peak power output for long periods must be avoided when they are breeding to prevent flooding of active nests. If irrigation projects are expanded at Nguruman, the issue of contamination of the lake with agro-chemicals might also arise.

The general impression is that the hydrology report is thorough and its recommendations sound. The main concern now is whether the Kenya Power Company can adhere to the very strict controls that it proposes: their primary purpose, after all, is to generate electricity. KWWG will be inviting Knight Piésold to make a public presentation of their findings early in 1993 at which these and other issues can be discussed.

July waterfowl count at Lake Nakuru

Waterbirds at Lake Nakuru were counted on 4 July 1992, this being the fifth in a bi-annual series of counts. A report has been circulated to all the 66 counters who took part: copies can be obtained from the Department of Ornithology. The lake level was low and the numbers of most birds, especially fish-eaters, were down on previous counts. There were around 210,000 flamingos on the lake. A seasonal pattern is now becoming apparent, with many species (not just Palaearctic migrants) being more abundant in January than July. Nakuru will be counted again in January 1993 along with Naivasha and other important wetlands.

Meanwhile, a 'second-hand' report has been received that large numbers of Lesser Flamingos were again breeding at Lake Natron this November. It will be interesting to see whether young birds are present on other lakes during the January counts.

International

Sokoke Scops Owl turns up in Tanzania...

A team of Cambridge students has made a remarkable discovery during a field expedition in the lowland forests of the Usambaras: in August 1992 they caught what appears to be a rufous-phase Sokoke Scops Owl *Otus ireneae*. Formerly this species was thought to be confined to *Cynometra* forest in the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest on the Kenya coast.

The owl was measured and photographed before being ringed and released. Details of measurements and the habitat where it was caught are still awaited. The photographs show some slight differences from the Kenyan birds: the outer primaries are strikingly striped black and white in the closed wing, and the primary coverts are very dark.

The team also recorded what they took to be the owl calling, but this actually appears to be the call of a Barred Owlet. (A National Museums team made the same mistake recently: see 'Shimba Hills' above.) Thus we do not yet know whether this bird calls like its Sokoke counterparts — it could be a different race or even a different species.

This exciting discovery further boosts the conservation importance of this very rich area of forest.

... and Grey Ground Thrush in Uganda

Two mangled specimens prepared as part of a training course in field techniques have turned out to be a new bird for East Africa, the Grey Ground Thrush *Zoothera* (formerly *Turdus*) *princei*, sub-species *batesi*. The birds were trapped in a mist-net in Semliki Forest during August 1992. The species is known from eastern Zaïre, which borders Semliki. Provisional identification was made in Nairobi, and confirmed by Dr Michel Louette of the Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium.

Burundi hosts 8th PAOC

The Eighth Pan-African Congress was held in Bujumbura, Burundi, from 30 September to 5 October 1992. Although smaller than the 1988 congress held in Nairobi, the representation of African ornithologists was the best ever, largely due to the active involvement of ICBP and RSPB. A sizeable contingent from South Africa, notably under-represented at the Nairobi congress, made this a truly 'Pan-African' event.

Four and a half days of scientific programme covered a wide range of topics and there were many excellent and stimulating presentations. Conservation took a front seat much of the time with two full days being organised by ICBP and IWRB. The ICBP day covered the organisation's recent biodiversity analyses and

the Africa programme, while IWRB's 'Wetlands Day' gave an overview of wetlands conservation and case studies from various countries, Kenya included.

During the ICBP day, Colin Bibby, ICBP's research director, gave a summary of the biodiversity project and the 'Endemic Bird Area' ('EBA') approach to bird conservation. The project has focused on restricted-range bird species, defined as those with a total range of under 50,000 km^2. This allows the identification of EBAs, areas where restricted-range species are concentrated. The analysis shows that these are generally biodiversity 'hot-spots' for other groups as well, so birds, probably the best-studied group of all, can be used to pin-point crucial conservation areas. Remarkably, it turns out that 20% of the world's birds, including 70% of all threatened species, are concentrated in just 2% of its land area.

The congress gave strong endorsement to extending this approach to identify Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in Africa. These will include sites already identified as important for restricted range species, plus key sites for threatened species and internationally important numbers of birds. The project should begin during 1993 and, in Kenya, involve many local ornithologists and birdwatchers.

Overall, the meeting confirmed that PAOC has a vital role in network-building among African ornithologists and conservationists. Despite the absence of any strong resolutions most participants departed full of enthusiasm and optimism for the future of African ornithology. The next PAOC will take place in the Gambia in 1996.

Bird Family Profiles

2: Sunbirds

Leon Bennun

What birds are Shining, Beautiful and Superb? Sunbirds, of course, and all these three can be found among Kenya's rich collection. Thirty-four of the world's 118 known species in the family Nectariniidae have been recorded here, and they are found in every habitat from hot, arid bushland to frozen mountain moorland.

Sunbirds are a group characterised by their long, thin, curved beaks and by the dazzling iridescent colours of the males in many species. They are little birds; even the largest species weigh less than 20 g, others as little as 6 g. In bird classifications, which reflect supposed evolutionary relationships, sunbirds are placed close to the weavers, a positioning supported by DNA studies. They are not at all closely related to other nectar-eating groups such as South African sugarbirds, Australian honeyeaters, or the New World hummingbirds (which are not even passerines).

Golden-winged Sunbird — *Ber van Perlo*

Sunbirds attract attention by their active behaviour, loud calls and bright colours. They are usually busy flitting from flower to flower with a characteristic rapid, jerky flight. They often defend territories centred on a patch of flowers; sunbirds of all other species are energetically chased away if they come too near. Their voices are usually less spectacular than their plumage, as most have squeaky metallic calls and short, tinkling songs. A few, like the Olive Sunbird, have sweet, plaintive songs that are more musical to the ear.

Although they are well known as nectar drinkers, sunbirds eat a lot of insects as well. Some small, short-billed species often behave much like warblers, searching actively for insects on leaves and twigs. Large species with long bills will also take insects, but are more dependent on the nectar in the long corollas of certain flowers. Sunbirds are important for the pollination of these flowers, which are usually large, conspicuous and coloured orange or red. (Bird-pollinated flowers tend to be red, a colour which birds — and people — detect easily; those pollinated by insects catch their visitors' eyes by being white or blue, often with markings in the ultra-violet that we cannot detect.) Typical sunbird flower species in Kenya include *Erythrina*, *Leonotis* and *Loranthus*, as well as many aloes, and, in moorland regions, proteas.

Sunbirds build delicate, beautifully fashioned covered nests that hang from a twig or leaf. The nest chamber is usually lined with soft seed-cotton and cobwebs, while the outside may be covered with old leaf scraps, moss and other detritus that effectively camouflages the nest. Some nests have a long tail of trailing rubbish that looks as though it had blown into the tree. The recently discovered nest of the Amani Sunbird is built inside a clump of hanging lichen on a *Brachystegia* tree. Sunbirds' nests have a small side entrance, and the

female's beak can be seen protruding from this while she is sitting. Male sunbirds help feed the young but that is the limit of their domestic duties; they take no part in nest building or incubating the eggs. Sunbirds appear to be monogamous, and the males usually guard their mates fiercely from others' attentions.

In Kenya, many high-altitude sunbirds migrate altitudinally, descending to warmer areas during the cold, wet season. Nairobi, at the edge of the highlands, is thus especially rich in sunbird species. Altitudinal migrants here include the Malachite and Golden-winged Sunbirds. Other species, such as Eastern and Northern Double-collared Sunbirds, may also move, while the Collared, Bronze, Scarlet-chested, Beautiful, Amethyst, Variable and Green-headed Sunbirds are probably resident. They are found in different parts of the city according to their habitat and altitude preferences. We still need much more information on the seasonality and other habits of these attractive and conspicuous birds.

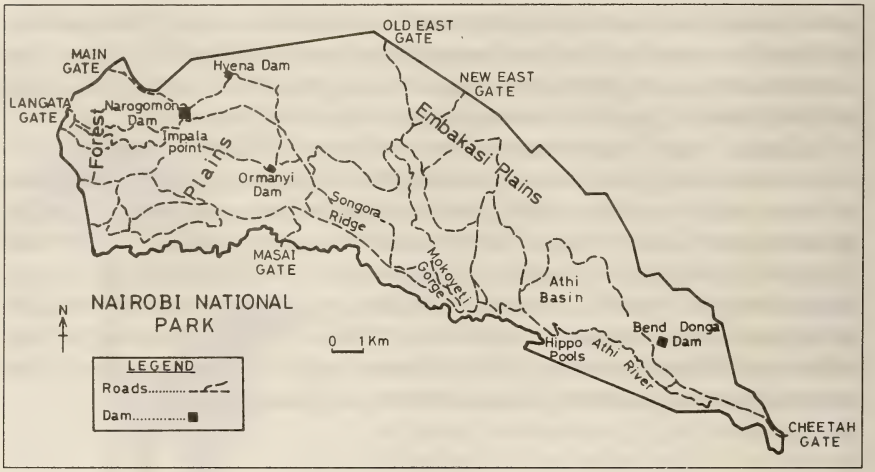
Birding in... Nairobi National Park

Yvonne Malcolm-Coe

Those living in Nairobi have something quite unique on their doorstep. Nairobi National Park covers only around 70 km^2, but it contains a great variety of habitats with an enormous diversity of birds (and other animals). The habitats include highland forest, open grass plains, bushland, rocky valleys and gorges, a permanent river with fringing *Acacia* woodland and thick scrub, and several dams and streams. Any drive taking in several of these habitats will produce a good number of birds. Each habitat has its 'special' birds, however, including species that are difficult to see elsewhere. Here I briefly outline what particularly interesting species you may find in each habitat or area. Nairobi National Park is especially good for cisticolas: there is an article elsewhere in this issue on these difficult 'little brown jobs'.

Forest

The higher, westernmost part of the park is covered by dry highland forest. Birding here is even more difficult than in most forests, as one cannot get out of the vehicle and walk around. However, if one scans the treetops in the more open areas there is a chance of seeing the Crowned Eagle soaring over. Listen out for its loud, rising and falling display call.



Open grass plains

Descending from the forest one enters the rolling grass plains, more or less wooded, that cover the bulk of the park. If the grass is high it can be difficult to find many birds, but they may be seen emerging into a more open part or onto the road. The plains are the best place to see bustards, which include Kori, White-bellied and Hartlaub's. Other notable ground-birds include Shelley's Francolin and Spotted Thicknee. Temminck's Courser may appear on short green grass after rain.

Also in evidence after good rain may be the beautiful Rosy-breasted Longclaw and several species of widowbirds. The Yellow-crowned Bishop appears where water has collected by the side of the road and reeds and sedges have grown up; it can be seen opposite the Narogomon Dam after descending the hill from the main gate, and also in the New East Gate area. Three other widowbird species, the White-winged, Red-naped and Jackson's can be seen in the thick long grass and sparse bush where the main road descends to the plains, along to the area below Impala Point. An extra bonus is to see Jackson's Widowbird performing its extraordinary courtship dance.

Rocky valleys and deep gorges

The cliffs in Mokoyeti Gorge are the haunt of the magnificent Verreaux's Eagle. The Martial Eagle can sometimes be seen in the shallower rocky valleys of the Songora Ridge area.

Hippo Pools and Athi River

This is probably the most rewarding area in the whole park because of the river and the different habitats surrounding it. Also, at Hippo Pools one can at last emerge from the vehicle and walk! On a Wednesday morning birdwalk some years back, we recorded over 70 species in this area. A choice few that you may see are: Green-backed Heron (towards the end of the nature trail in vegetation overhanging the river); African Finfoot (a shy and skulking species, which may nonetheless be detected swimming along under thick overhanging vegetation at the river's edge); Green Pigeon (in fig trees along the river); Narina's Trogon; Giant Kingfisher; Striped Kingfisher and Red-throated Tit (these two in the fringing *Acacia* woodland); Yellow Warbler (in thick scrub at the river's edge); and Moustached Warbler (in the scrub or *Acacia* trees).

Dams and streams

The dams and streams scattered throughout the park harbour some particularly interesting species. These include Madagascar Squacco Heron (look amongst the reeds during the period May to September); Black Stork (on Bend Donga dam during the migratory period); Saddle-billed Stork (occasional in marshy areas around the dams); Purple Gallinule (Hyena Dam); African Water Rail (very skulking, but can be seen around Hyena Dam); Pied Kingfisher and Malachite Kingfisher.

Records and Notes

This section exists for the rapid publication of interesting observations, and contributions are welcomed. If you are sending in records to ***Kenya Birds****, please consider the following guidelines. For* ***breeding records****, send in cases of CONFIRMED breeding, i.e. birds incubating eggs or feeding nestlings/ fledglings. Records of confirmed breeding are useful for ALL species, even the most common ones; records of nest-building, courtship etc. are only needed for rare species or ones where there are few breeding records. You are strongly urged to fill in a* ***nest-record card*** *at the same time. Much more detail can be recorded on a card, and if your record can be added to the card collection then it is of permanent value. Cards can be obtained free of charge from the EANHS Nest Record Scheme Organiser (see back page). A report listing records submitted to the scheme is published every second year in the Annual Bird Report of* Scopus.

For other records of ***Afrotropical/oceanic*** *birds and* ***Palaearctic*** *birds, please send in any sightings and notes that you think are of interest. The Editors will select records for publication according to the space available. For* ***all*** *records, including breeding records, please be as precise as possible about* ***dates*** *and* ***locations****. If you have sightings from places not easily found on the map, please take the trouble to give the latitude and longitude to as much precision as you can (preferably the nearest second*

of arc or better). This will allow us to use these records when we begin, very soon, to update and refine the present Bird Atlas of Kenya by computerising bird distribution records.

Supporting details are always welcomed for unusual records and will improve the chances of publication. Records of certain species are requested for inclusion in the Scopus *Annual Bird Report (the third issue of* Scopus *each year). These should be sent to Don Turner (P.O. Box 48019, Nairobi), who can also supply information on which records are required. For particularly unusual sightings supporting details (i.e. field notes, photographs etc.) will be needed for scrutiny by the OS-c Rarities Committee.*

Key to records

New atlas square records are indicated in square brackets. Codes are: **pres**, present (first record); **post pres**, present (first post-1970 record); **prob**, probable breeding; **conf**, confirmed breeding; **post conf**, confirmed breeding (first since 1970); e.g. **[pres, conf 25B]** indicates that the species is present and confirmed as breeding in square 25B.'

Where scientific names are not stated here (and elsewhere in *Kenya Birds*) the English names follow Britton (ed.) 1980 *Birds of East Africa.*

Breeding records

Breeding records on nest record cards that are not included here will be published in the next EANHS Nest Record Scheme Report.

African Black Duck: Adult with two half-grown young, Chagaik, Kericho 21/10/92 AJB. **Crowned Crane**: Adults with three young, heads reaching up to adult's belly 21/6/92 & with one young, a third adult size 18–27/9/92, Nairobi N. P. DB. Adults with two young, c. 6 weeks old, Mara Safari Camp 25/10/92 AJB. **Spotted Thicknee [conf 74A]**: Five young with four adults, north-west Mara 9/7/92 ES. **Laughing Dove [conf 49D]**: One egg 23/7/92, deserted 30/7; one egg 24/8, deserted 30/8, Kimwarer, Kerio Valley VGW. **Tambourine Dove [conf 114A]**: Female sitting, Mkongani, Shimba Hills 24–27/10/92, NMK. **African Cuckoo [conf 49D]**: Fed by two adult Drongos, Kimwarer, Kerio Valley 7/6/92 RB, NW & VGW. **White-rumped Swift [conf 49D]**: Hatched 17/7/92, fledged by 15/9, Kimwarer, Kerio Valley VGW. **Malachite Kingfisher [conf 61A]**: Adult feeding young, Chagaik, Kericho 28/10/92 AJB. **Green Wood Hoopoe [conf 49D]**: Adults feeding at nest, Kimwarer, Kerio Valley 6/4/92 NW & RB. **Crowned Hornbill [prob 114A]**: Adult carrying food, Mkongani, Shimba Hills 26/10/92, NMK. **Spotted-flanked Barbet [conf 74A]**: Adults feeding at nest 13/6/92, fledged around 5/7, Mara Safari Club MC. **White-headed Barbet [pres, conf 62C]**: Adults feeding chicks in nest hole, Lake Naivasha 7/10/92 AC. **Black-throated Barbet**: Adults feeding at nest, Ndara Ranch 22/6/92 GI & DI. **Red-fronted Tinkerbird [conf 49D]**: Adult feeding two young 21/6/92, VGW. **Scaly-throated Honeyguide**: Fledgling (from Grey Woodpecker nest), Mara River Camp, 1/7/92 ES. **Striped Swallow [conf 49D]**: Chicks 18/7/92, fledged 1/8, Kimwarer, Kerio Valley, VGW. **African Rock Martin [conf 49D]**: Two eggs 1/7/92, two young 18/7, fledged 2/8, sitting again 13/9, Kimwarer, Kerio Valley, VGW & NW. **African Penduline Tit [conf 49D]**: Adult feeding juv, Kimwarer, Kerio Valley 21/6/92 NW & VGW. **Little Greenbul** and **Tiny Greenbul [prob 114A]**: Brood patch on captured birds, Shimba Hills 24–31/10/92, NMK. **Placid Greenbul**: Adults feeding fledgling, Nairobi 2/9/92 WMBw. **Spotted Morning Thrush [conf 49D]**: Displaying at nest, Kimwarer, Kerio Valley 6/4/92

VGW. **Grey-backed Camaroptera [prob 114A]**: Brood patch on captured birds, Shimba Hills 24–31/10/92 NMK. **Lead-coloured Flycatcher [pres, conf 114A]**: Adult feeding two fledglings, Mkongani Forest, Shimba Hills 26/10/92 NMK. **Forest Batis [prob 114A]**: Brood patch on captured birds, Shimba Hills 24–31/10/92 NMK. **Wattle-eye**: Two nestlings fed by adults, Mara River camp 27/8/92 ES. **Plain-backed Pipit [conf 74A]:** Four chicks in nest, in tuft of grass facing west, near Mara River Camp, 8/8/92 PD. **African Pied Wagtail [conf 49D]**: Four small nestlings, 23/6/92; feeding at nest 17/9/92, Kimwarer, Kerio Valley NW. **Northern Puffback [conf 49D]**: Nest seen 11/7/92, one nestling 4/8/92, Kimwarer, Kerio Valley, RB & VGW. **Rüppell's Long-tailed Glossy Starling [conf 49D]**: Adults feeding at nest, Kimwarer, Kerio Valley 19/4/92. **Tacazze Sunbird:** Female feeding young, Kinondoni (above Chogoria) 9–12/8/92, PJS & LC. **Olive Sunbird [prob 114A]**: brood patch on captured birds, Shimba Hills 24–31/10/92 NMK. **Red-headed Weaver [conf 49D]**: Nest seen 14/3/92, fledgling fed by adult 29/3; hatched 3/8/92, fledgling flew 20/8, Kimwarer, Kerio Valley, RB & VGW. **Baglafecht Weaver [conf 49D]**: Juv fed by adult, Kimwarer, Kerio Valley 26/6/92 VGW. **Chestnut-crowned Sparrow Weaver [post conf 49D]**: Two juvs fed by adults -/6–7/92, Kimwarer, Kerio Valley, VGW. **Red-cheeked Cordon-bleu [conf 49D]**: Three eggs 10/8/92, fledged by 3/9, Kimwarer, Kerio Valley, VGW. **Silverbill [pres, conf 49D]**: Nestlings heard, Kimwarer, Kerio Valley 21/6/92 NW.

Other records: Afrotropical and oceanic species

White-backed Night Heron [pres 63D]: Mwea National Reserve, 27/8/91 PJS & PJF; see above. **Long-crested Eagle [pres 114A]**: Maluganji Forest 30/11/92 JHF, DN & LAB. **Swallow-tailed Kite:** Four near Mweiga, hawking, 25/7/92 PD. **Crowned Crane:** Dawn flight of 54 birds, Banita Dam to swamp, Banita Sisal Estate (n. Nakuru) 19/9/92 IM. **Temminck's Courser**: pair, Majani Mingi 20/9/92 IM. **Lemon Dove [pres 114A]:** Mkongani Forest, Shimba Hills, 26–27/10/92 NMK. **Black Cuckoo**: Mkongani, Shimba Hills, 24–27/10/92, NMK. **African Cuckoo:** Moi North Lake Road, Naivasha 4/10/92 KB. **Thick-billed Cuckoo [pres 114A]**: Maluganji Forest 1/12/92 JHF, DN & LAB. **Barred Owlet [pres 114A]:** Shimba Hills, 31/10/92 LAB; Maluganji Forest 30/11/92 JHF, DN & LAB. **Black-and-white Casqued Hornbill:** 52 in one group, Maseno 14/9/92 JA. **Wahlberg's Honeybird [pres 114A]**: Mkongani, Shimba Hills, 23/10/92, NMK. **Northern Brownbul [pres 114A]**: Maluganji Forest 1/12/92 JHF, DN & LAB. **Red-fronted Warbler [pres 75D]**: Elangata Wuas, Kajiado, 19–20/9/92 PJS. **Sokoke Pipit [pres 114A]**: Mkongani Forest, Shimba Hills, 24–27/10/92 NMK. **Grey-backed Fiscal [pres 61C]**: Sotik, since July 1992 IWF. **Red-winged Starlings**: 50+ hawking insects around fig tree, Kericho 21/10/92, "noise incredible" KB. **Abyssinian White-eye [pres 114 A]**: Shimba Hills, 24–27/10/92 NMK. **Black-necked Weaver [post pres 51A]**: Samburu Serena Lodge, 12/10/92 AC.

Other records: Palaearctic species

Eurasian Bee-eaters: Flock of over 100, very active, Arroket Estate, Sotik, 18/9/92 IWF; 30+ flying high, Majani Mingi 20/9/92 IM. **Yellow Wagtail:** First seen Sotik 17/10/92 IWF; **Blackcap, Garden Warbler, Willow Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher:** Nairobi, all arrived between 14/11 and 22/11/92 FN.

Contributors
AC, Adrian Craig; AJB, Kimbo Beakbane; DB Dorrie Brass; DN, David Ngala; ES, Edwin Selempo; FN, Fleur Ng'weno; IM, Ian Marshall; IWF, Mr & Mrs I. W. Francombe; JA, Jeam Agutu; JHF, John Fanshawe; KB, Kimbo Beakbane; LAB, Leon Bennun; LC, Lise Campbell; MC, Mike Clifton; NMK, Ornithology Department forest team (George Amutete, Leon Bennun, Patrick Gichuki, Edward Waiyaki); NW, N. Wilson; PD, Peter Davey; PJF, Patrick Frere; PJS, Peter Squelch; RB, R. Berry; VGW, V. G. Wilson; WMBw, Wednesday morning bird-walk group.

Unusual noise by Emerald Cuckoos

My office is in Peponi Gardens, on the border of the Karura Forest with the Mathare River flowing alongside. Birdlife in the six months that I have been there has been outstanding, with both forest and riverine species. The office is shared with Dennie Angwin, who is keeping meticulous records of everything seen and heard.

We have seen and heard four species of cuckoo (Red-chested, Didric, Klaas' and Emerald) on a fairly regular basis, and know their calls well. However, in early December we heard a totally new noise which made us both abandon the office and head for the garden with binoculars. The sound can best be described as a *very loud* three-note warble. The first time we heard it, around 12:30 h on 1 December, I rushed outside and found that the noise was coming from riverine bush on the other side of my boundary wall, at a height of about 8 m. This seemed too high, and the sound was very definitely too loud, for a Rüppell's Robin Chat. Suddenly a flash of colour flew towards me, and there was no mistaking the vivid green and yellow of an Emerald Cuckoo. The noise was not repeated, the cuckoo disappeared into a tall tree, and we concluded that the originator of the noise had eluded us.

A few days later, on 4 December, at the same time of day, Dennie and I were both sitting on the verandah when we heard the noise again. Once again, we were struck by the extraordinary volume of the call, which seemed to be coming from a height of about 10 m. We combed the vegetation with binoculars, but were unable to find the birds responsible. I had to go out for a few minutes, leaving Dennie still searching, and when I returned she had solved the mystery. Not one, not two, but *three* male Emerald Cuckoos had been chasing each other through the foliage, and Dennie had seen them make this remarkable noise.

We dived for the reference books. M. K. Rowan in *The Doves, Parrots and Louries of Southern Africa* mentions only the familiar "Hello, Georgie" call, but states that only the males are known to call. *Birds of Africa, Vol. 3* mentions a rapid "jujujujujujuju", which is not the noise we heard. Maclean, in *Roberts' Birds of South Africa*, after describing the familiar "Hello, Georgie", says, "rarely

an explosive series of melodious notes". Mackworth-Praed and Grant (*Birds of the Southern Third of Africa*) says "there is also a rarely used more melodious series of notes in the breeding season, and in display the male makes an audible rustling sound with its wings". This is not mentioned in the volume for East and North-Eastern Africa. Clancey (*The Birds of Natal and Zululand*) states only that "Males through the breeding season utter a pleasant 'tee-tutee'". None of the books mentions male Emerald Cuckoos occurring in groups: we have only ever seen solitary birds.

This breeding call of the Emerald Cuckoo is either rare, or has caused countless ornithologists to admit defeat. Cuckoos are more often heard than seen, and this noise is so extraordinarily loud, melodious and explosive that birdwatchers may assume it to be a loud-mouthed robin chat, or even the neighbour's parrot.

We would be very interested to know if any other *Kenya Birds* readers have heard this sound. — *Jean Hartley, P. O. Box 14098, Nairobi.*

Friedmann's Lark resurfaces in Tsavo

Between March 1976 and January 1977, Peter Lack noted an unfamiliar lark species singing and displaying during rainy periods in open bushed grassland areas near Voi Safari Lodge in Tsavo East National Park (see *Scopus* 1: 34-39). Several individuals were involved. A collected specimen confirmed the identity of the birds as Friedmann's Lark *Mirafra pulpa*, a species not previously described in the field. Indeed at the time it was known from just six specimens collected in eastern Kenya and southern Ethiopia. Another Friedmann's Lark was caught and ringed at night at Ngulia in December 1978, and a lark tape-recorded at Kiboko in June 1974 by Rowland MacVicker has since been confirmed as this species. Otherwise there have been no records of calling or displaying birds; in fact, there have been no entirely satisfactory records of this species for the last 16 years, until it reappeared in unprecedented numbers in Tsavo West N. P. this December.

We first noticed the larks on 2 December. They were on sparsely bushed grassy plains about 4 km north-east of Kilaguni Lodge, together with unusually large numbers of Singing Bush Larks and Flappet Larks. The Friedmann's Larks drew attention with a far-carrying repeated single-note call, "hwee-oo", given about once every two seconds. They called from the tops of low bushes or in song flight, while cruising in circles about 30 m wide and 15–20 m above the ground. During their song flight, the birds alternately fluttered then glided briefly with wings raised, beginning the call towards the end of each glide.

The birds seemed to be confined to areas which had been burned a few years previously. Here the bush cover was low, only 2–5%, and the grass (although sometimes a metre high) did not cover the ground completely. Some of the park

tracks had acted as fire-breaks, and it was interesting that the larks were absent from the bushier, more grown up side of the tracks.

The main concentration seemed to be in an area of about 5 km by 4 km in extent. We counted 55 calling birds on this and the next morning, and estimated that about 150 males were present. Some chasing was going on, but whether of rival birds or females we could not tell. A smaller group of calling larks was later found in a second area — also recently burned — about half-way from Kilaguni to Mtito Andei.

Friedmann's Lark is a medium-sized brown, streaked lark with white outer tail feathers. It is rather featureless, and when not calling or displaying it is very hard to distinguish from the Singing Bush Lark. From the birds we saw in Tsavo, we think it should be possible to separate Friedmann's at close range from the local race (*marginata*) of Singing Bush Lark by its generally warm brown (as opposed to drab or greyish brown) upperparts and more sharply streaked mantle. Also, its bill appears rather heavier, the pale supercilium less pronounced and the crest (at least when calling) more emphasised.

It remains to be seen whether the Tsavo birds will stay to breed successfully, and whether the species will be found elsewhere in eastern Kenya this year. Its movements and migratory status remain very much a mystery. — *David Pearson (Browses, Sibton, Saxmundham, Suffolk IP17 2JH, UK) , Stephen Rodwell and Don Turner.*

Garden raptors in Nairobi

My garden in Hospital Rd., Upper Hill, Nairobi, is close to the centre of town, but still turns up a remarkable variety of birds. Between May and August 1992 a number of interesting birds of prey have been in evidence.

On hearing a strange, almost human cry one evening I went out onto the verandah and a Barn Owl flew away — it had been perched on one of the potted plants. This peculiar yelping sound is evidently a breeding call. The Barn Owl has always been in this area, and I hear its familiar snores and screeches often.

A pair of Spotted Eagle Owls moved into the garden this year and roosted in a tree with thick foliage. I would see them each day, flying from the tree and away to hunt at dusk. In the early morning they would perch on the flat roof and call to each other before flying back into the tree to roost. Regrettably, the owls were discovered by the Pied Crows and from then on were constantly harassed each morning and evening. Finally they moved away, but I assumed that this would happen in any case once the tree shed its leaves.

Other visitors have included an immature Harrier Hawk, seen raiding weavers' nests, and a Great Sparrowhawk chasing an African Goshawk through the garden. The Great Sparrowhawk is one of a pair that have nested in Fleur

Ng'weno's garden (further down the ridge) for the last two years, while the African Goshawk is occasionally seen flying through. — *Yvonne Malcolm-Coe, P. O. Box 48504, Nairobi.*

The Enkejo Oolowurak Gorge and Kisengela Plains

Coming from Nairobi towards the Ngong Hills, you will find, just after Kiserian, a turn-off south marked Kajiado. This is an excellent, new road; about 18 km along it there is a steep dip and climb. On the left of this is the beginning of a gorge and riverbed, the Enkejo Oolowurak. At the top of the crest, a small dirt area off the road allows for parking, and you can see the tops of acacia trees down in the gorge.

We visited the gorge on 9 August 1992. It is a unique little environment. We spent almost five hours wandering about, yet covered only about 500 m. The gorge is relatively shallow with plenty of rocks on the sandy or gravelly bed. The surrounding area is very rocky and grassy; the gorge is bordered by abundant thicket and *Acacia xanthophloea* woodland. During our visit everything was still very green and there were isolated pools of stagnant water every 50–100 m.

We saw at least 43 species in and around the gorge, among them Red-throated Tit, Spotted Morning Thrush, Yellow-bellied Eremomela, Brown Parisoma, Straw-tailed Whydah and Quailfinch.

Travelling further towards Isinya and Kajiado through the Kisengela Plains, we saw a variety of raptors, including Pygmy Falcons, and no fewer than 62 Crowned Cranes feeding in a field. Giraffe, Thomson's Gazelle and Zebra were also plentiful, with the rolling golden plains as a majestic backdrop. Altogether a fantastic area and well worth a visit for any birder. — *Yvonne Malcolm-Coe, Alan Castree, Dave Lugers, Viv and Peter Carsons, P. O. Box 48504, Nairobi.*

Marabous snaffle swallows

Like most other game lodges, Ngulia has its contingent of Marabou Storks. In the morning they shuffle out in front of the dining room to pick up beetles fried by the lights during the night. Tiring of this, they may stand about in a morose fashion waiting for someone to throw them a bread roll, which they catch most adeptly despite their sluggish appearance.

Around the end of the first week of ringing at Ngulia (see the article in this issue), the lodge was visited each morning by a large flock of Barn (Eurasian) Swallows. These evidently came from a roost some distance away, since they only arrived in numbers at about 08:30 — around the time that the morning's

catch from the bushes had been dealt with, and the ringing team was sitting down to breakfast. The swallows flew in and out amongst the lights in front of the dining room, often only a few centimetres above the ground, presumably picking up dazed or dying insects that were still in the air.

Once the feeding swallows reached a certain density, there was an interesting change in Marabou behaviour. They stopped picking about the lights, and arranged themselves in a geometrically regular pattern over a small area of 100 m^2 or so where the swallows were most active. Each stork stood hunched and motionless, apparently preoccupied with philosophical speculation. If any swallow came within range, however, the Marabou would suddenly lunge at it with a dramatic, lightning snap of the beak. Much of the time the Marabou would miss completely, but perhaps one in four snaps was followed by a stifled squeak, a little flurry of feathers, and, without further ado, a wriggling lump descending the stork's capacious gorge.

Migrant birds face many threats, but predatory Marabous are not normally considered to be one of them. Indeed, the swallows were evidently entirely unaware of the danger they were in. They ignored the Marabous completely, weaving in and out among them as if the storks were so many stones. Perhaps the most distressing part of the whole affair was to see, on at least one occasion, the unmistakeable flash of a newly-placed ring as a swallow vanished down a Marabou gullet, ending its continental crossing once and for all. — *Leon Bennun, Dept. Ornithology, Box 40658, Nairobi.*

Threatened Birds of Kenya

2: Hinde's Babbler

Don Turner

Little has been documented about Hinde's Babbler *Turdoides hindei* since Sharpe described the type specimen from Athi River in 1900. Literature on the species is sparse and at times somewhat controversial. As such, Hinde's Babbler remains a little-known Kenya endemic with an extremely limited range, centred today on the south-eastern slopes of Mt Kenya in Embu District.

The species was formerly found from Athi River and Machakos north to Meru District. Over the past few decades, the advance of agricultural development in central Kenya appears to have reduced this range substantially. Nowadays the birds are found on the fringes of cultivation, in river valleys with dense secondary growth and in dry *Lantana* thickets.

In all respects, Hinde's is a typical *Turdoides* babbler. Like other species, it

Please enter my subscription to *Kenya Birds* for 1993

Name _____

Postal address _____

_____

*I am / am not a member of the East Africa Natural History Society

(**Delete as appropriate*)

I enclose a cheque / postal order for _____

Note: Please do not send bank drafts inKenya currency

SEND TO: Kenya Birds Department of Ornithology, National Museums of Kenya, P.O. Box 40658, Nairobi, Kenya

✂ -

Subscription Rates (1 Year)

	EANHS members	**Non-members**
Kenya	KSh 120/-	KSh 200/-
Elsewhere (air mail)	UK £6.00	UK £7.50

(Subscribers outside Kenya may pay in any convertible currency.)

Students: Full-time students who are EANHS members may receive *Kenya Birds* free. They should write giving details of their institution, course and completion date with an endorsement and stamp from their supervisor or headmaster.

Hinde's Babbler — *Ber van Perlo*

occurs in small parties of 5–8 individuals, often revealing its presence by raucous babbling calls. The birds prefer to feed in dense thickets. However, they are sometimes seen perched on exposed branches, or feeding quietly on the ground in open grassy areas or in leaf litter around *Lantana* thickets and coffee bushes.

No two individuals are quite alike in plumage. The amount of white on the head, mantle and upperparts varies from scaling and spotting to quite heavy blotching. This gave rise at one stage to the idea that Hinde's Babbler might represent a hybrid population. The one consistent feature of the species is the bright red colour of the eye. This is a striking field character that easily separates it from the pale-eyed Northern Pied and Black-lored Babblers (*T. hypoleucos* and *T. melanops*), and the orange-eyed Arrow-marked Babbler (*T. jardineii*).

There are few documented breeding records. However, the eggs are described as being glossy light blue, and the breeding season largely coincides with the long rains from April to August. In February 1978 a fully fledged Black-and-white Cuckoo *Oxylophus jacobinus* was observed being fed by a Hinde's Babbler, itself a member of a group of 6–7 babblers.

The current known populations of Hinde's Babbler appear to be a series of small, highly resident groups, often confined to specific valleys. This suggests that the species is surviving in relatively isolated and possibly highly interbred pockets, which itself could account for the high incidence of partial albinism that seems to occur. It is also likely that inbreeding could result in infertility, which may be one explanation for the species' continued rarity throughout its range.

Northern Pied Babblers occur alongside Hinde's Babblers in many areas. They may well be pushing out the less successful Hinde's, whose total populations today could be less than a thousand individuals. As such, Hinde's Babbler has become an extremely vulnerable species. Constant monitoring is now essential to determine whether it is continuing to decline, and if so, what efforts should be made to conserve some of the areas where it occurs. At the same time, a study of its biology is urgently required to determine if any other factors are contributing to its apparent decrease in numbers.

Identification first aid:

Cisticolas in Nairobi National Park

Yvonne Malcolm-Coe

The grass warblers of the genus *Cisticola* are among the more difficult Kenyan birds to identify. When one of these birds appears, looking small, brown and featureless, many birdwatchers must be tempted to look resolutely in the opposite direction. This is a pity, because cisticolas are very habitat specific and in a familiar area — like Nairobi National Park — can be identified fairly easily. This selective choice of habitats, their diversity, and their distinctive calls and (sometimes) displays, also make them particularly interesting birds to observe.

No fewer than nine species of cisticola can be seen in Nairobi National Park. These are listed below in the order in which they can be observed as one travels through the park after entering by the main gate. For each, the species, area, habitat, description and call are given. Cisticolas are probably best observed during the rainy season, when they are particularly active. Later on the adults may be accompanied by immatures, which often look quite yellow underneath.

Singing *C. cantans*. Can be seen just after entering the Main Gate, in thick shrubbery and rank undergrowth on the edge of the forest. Size 14 cm. The back is unstreaked; crown dark chestnut; and mantle grey-brown with a patch of dull brown visible in the closed wing. The underparts are dusky. The call is a loud, far-carrying "bridget" or "prit-chew", a familiar sound in many Nairobi gardens.

Stout *C. robusta*. Found where the road levels out onto the plains and the habitat becomes long grass and scattered bush. Size 14 cm. This species looks large and stocky. The crown and nape are orange-rufous, and the mantle greyish with thick black streaks. The underparts are creamy-buff, and the bill heavy. The call is a full vibrating tremolo, with a sharp "weet weet" alarm call.

Pectoral-patch *C. brunnescens*. Found on the open grass plains. During the breeding season this species can be seen flying up from the grass, circling, then diving back down. Size 9 cm. It has a short tail and appears very small. The male's crown is brown-buff, that of the female brighter buff. The mantle is pale buffish with thick black streaking, making the bird appear very dark above. Below it is buffy-white with dusky patches at the side of the chest. The call, uttered while in flight, is a high-pitched "zee zee zee".

Winding *C. galactotes*. Found around Ormanyi Dam and along streams, in damp grassland and sedges. Size 13 cm. Appears slim with a long tail. The crown is rufous and the mantle greyish and broadly streaked with black. A bright rufous

patch shows in the closed wing. The underparts are buffy white. The male's call is like that of the Stout but shorter and less vibrating, followed by a 'winding' sound like an old-fashioned alarm clock 'running down' . The female utters a long upward "wheeee" whistle.

Croaking *C. natalensis*. Occurs in Rocky Valley and similar shallow valley areas with grass and sparsely scattered bush. Size 14 cm. Appears stocky. Crown and mantle pale brown, with fairly heavy dark streaking. Sometimes the crown may look slightly more rufous. The underparts are creamy-white. The calls are distinctive and can best be described as 'explosive plonking' and 'wheezing'. There is also a repeated single, unmusical but vibrating call which can be heard a long way off. During courtship the pair will duet and display while perched on top of a bush.

Siffling *C. brachyptera*. Can be seen at the top of Sosian Gorge (i.e. Leopard Lookout) and before the road descends to Hippo Pools. This species prefers bushed and wooded grassland. Size 9–10 cm. The upperparts are brown and thinly streaked dark; the crown is brown and more thickly streaked. The underparts are white, tinged buffish on the flanks. If seen at the top of a tree in bright sunlight, the bird appears as a small bright blob. The song, uttered from its high perch, is a distinctive, wispy, 'siffling' or 'mississippi-ing', continuously repeated.

Rattling *C. chiniana*. Found around Hippo Pools, in dry thornbush and scrub at the start of the walk and along the Athi River. Size 13 cm. The colour of the crown varies from chestnut to dull rufous brown. The mantle is grey-brown with fairly thick blackish streaking, and the underparts are creamy. The call is loud and distinctively harsh: a rapid rattling "chaa, chaa, churr-chee-chee".

Red-faced *C. erythrops*. Seen at Hippo Pools and along the Athi River in thick shrubbery on the steep river banks. Size 14 cm. The upperparts, including the crown, are grey and unstreaked. The forehead, sides of face and a stripe over the eye are a rusty red colour. The underparts are creamy-buff with a whiter throat. This bird is shy and skulking in the thick, lush vegetation it frequents. The call is loud and similar to that of the Singing Cisticola, but higher-pitched and more strident and whip-like: "chip-wip, chip-wit, chip-wip" and "wheep wheep".

Zitting *C. juncidis*. Occurs in the Athi Basin area and towards Cheetah Gate, preferring long or short grassland in both dry and damp situations, at a slightly lower altitude to other species. Size 10 cm. A small species, but with a longer tail than the Pectoral-patch Cisticola. The male has the crown and mantle brown with bold black streaking, less pronounced on the neck. The underparts are buffish-white. The female is less boldly streaked above and whiter below. This species

has an undulating courtship flight, during which it utters a monotonous repeated single "zit" on each upward swoop.

The species described can, of course, be seen elsewhere in the park in appropriate habitat. Many of these species are also found elsewhere in the Nairobi area:

Singing: A very familiar and vocal bird in many gardens;
Stout: In open vleis and bushed areas in, for instance, Langata;
Pectoral-patch: Magadi Road, at the higher southern end of the Ngong Hills;
Winding: At the perimeter of lakes and dams around Nairobi;
Siffling: Along the Thika Road, near Kenyatta University and at Blue Posts Hotel, Thika;
Rattling: Areas with bush and small trees: Langata, west of Ngong towards Kedong Valley, Mombasa Road, Lukenya;
Red-faced: Lower Kabete, Loresho, Kitisuru and the Arboretum, where there are small streams or rivers with thick vegetation on the steeper slopes. Never seen far from the stream.

Profile in Action: Fleur Ng'weno

Yvonne Malcolm-Coe

Fleur Ng'weno is well known, and respected, as the leader of the popular Wednesday morning birdwalks held in and around Nairobi. A little of her background history is that she obtained a BSc (Hons.) degree in conservation at the University of Michigan in 1960. She then worked for a while for the Audubon Society in the USA. Fleur came to Kenya in 1963 to visit her parents who were stationed here. She then got married and, of course, stayed. Fleur is the editor of the educational children's magazine *Rainbow*. Among her many other activities, she is on the Executive Committee of the East Africa Natural History Society, the Council of the East African Wildlife Society, a Committee member of the Kenya Wetlands Working Group, and an Advisory Member of ICBP Kenya.

The birdwalks first began in 1971, on a Wednesday morning. Rain or shine, Fleur has led them every week since that time, except for brief periods when she has been away — a truly remarkable record. According to Fleur, Nairobi is situated right on the boundary between the grasslands spreading down to Kilimanjaro in the south, and the wooded hills rising to the Aberdares in the north. Consequently the birdwalks take place in many diverse habitats, and there is always something of interest to see.

Fleur plans the birdwalks carefully. Not only are the birds observed and

discussed, but all other aspects of natural history are included as well. The area near the Carnivore restaurant will be visited during the rains, when, as well as migratory birds passing through, flowers and succulents appear and there is animal life in the ponds. Forest Edge Road will be visited when the fungi are present. Prior to a KWWG waterfowl count, she will take the group to Limuru ponds or some other suitable wetland area, in order that participants can rehearse and study the waterfowl species. The birdwalks are as varied as the areas and habitats visited. Fleur's fund of knowledge is endless and her enthusiasm boundless. She is a true naturalist.

A previous young participant in Fleur's birdwalks states: "Fleur helped me find a talent that I did not know I had. Her beliefs concerning wildlife protection and conservation have influenced mine. She made me aware that you cannot just sit there and let people destroy our environment: you have to take action to preserve our planet. Thanks to Fleur my interest in birds and wildlife has become a life-long passion."

Children's Section

Bird facts

Did *you* know that...

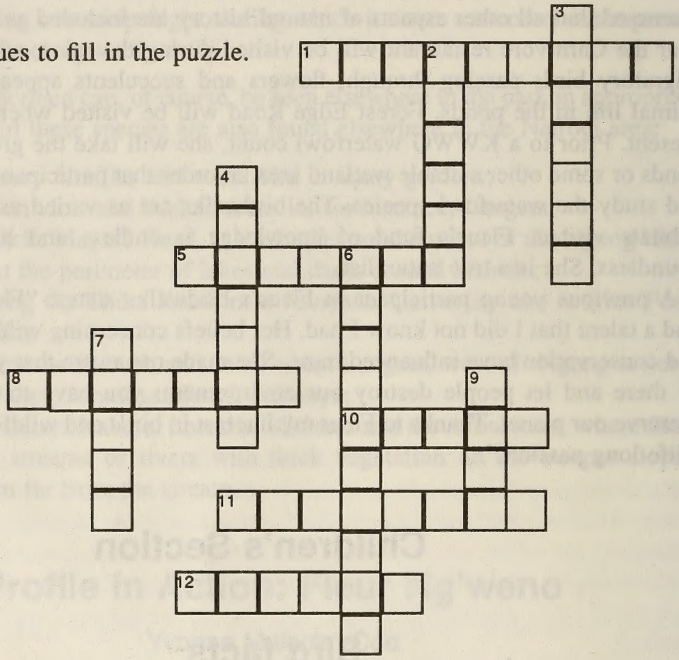
— Flamingos and pigeons feed 'milk' to their young? (So does the Emperor Penguin.) The 'milk' is produced in the crop, a part of the throat where the birds normally store food. It is a rich food and allows the young birds to grow fast. Flamingo 'milk' is dark red! The colour comes from the food that the adults eat.

— Sandgrouse, which live in hot, dry areas, have to drink every day — either in the early morning or the evening? To bring water to the young, the male sandgrouse soaks special feathers on his belly then flies back to the nest. He can transport water this way for a distance of up to 30 km.

— The Ostrich lays the largest egg of any living bird? Ostrich eggs often weigh more than 1.5 kg and the heaviest recorded was almost 2 kg. The egg is very strong and resists most predators, but Egyptian Vultures have learned to break the eggs by throwing stones at them!

Bird Word

— Use the clues to fill in the puzzle.



Clues

Across

1. A bird of prey that is common in towns, with a forked tail and a trembling call (two words).
5. The biggest bird in the world.
8. A big white bird that uses a pouch on its beak to catch fish.
10. A set of nestlings in a nest.
11. All birds have these.
12. Another word for a bird of prey.

Down

2. A set of eggs laid by a bird.
3. A bird that moves from one place to another at particular seasons.
4. Showy behaviour to attract a mate or defend a territory.
7. Many birds together form a ...
6. Sitting on eggs to keep them warm.
9. To fly on air currents without flapping the wings.

Have we used the wrong address for you?

Do you know someone else who would like to receive **Kenya Birds**?

Write and tell us...

Editors, Kenya Birds, Department of Ornithology
National Museums of Kenya
P. O. Box 40658, Nairobi, Kenya

Events and Announcements

Morning **Bird Walks** led by Fleur Ng'weno and Damaris continue every Wednesday. Meet at 8:45 am at the National Museums entrance for a walk in the Nairobi area. These walks are for EANHS members: non-members are welcome but requested to join the Society (see below).

Kenya Wetlands Working Group **Waterfowl Counts** at Naivasha, 9–10 January 1993, Nakuru, 16–17 Jan., Elmenteita 18 Jan., Bogoria 23–24 Jan. Contact the Department of Ornithology, National Museums of Kenya (address below).

International Council for Bird Preservation. ICBP in Cambridge publish a quarterly magazine called **World Birdwatch** which is the voice of the organisation and its supporting **World Bird Club**. For details write to: International Council for Bird Preservation, 32 Cambridge Road, Girton, Cambridge CB3 0PJ, U.K.

East Africa Natural History Society. All birders in East Africa should join this Society, which offers lectures, excursions and publications with a strong bird focus. Sub-committees of the Society include the OS-c and ICBP-Kenya. The EANHS also organises ringing and nest record schemes in eastern Africa. For membership details: tel. 742131/61, ext. 278, or write to the Hon. Secretary, EANHS, P.O. Box 44486 Nairobi. The office at the National Museums of Kenya is open each weekday morning.

Scopus the lively regional journal of ornithology, is published three times a year by the OS-c and can be obtained from the OS-c Hon. Treasurer and Secretary Don Turner, P.O. Box 48019, Nairobi, Kenya (tel: Nairobi 48133). The annual subscription is KSh 250 (KSh 260 up-country), overseas rates available from Don Turner. Records are welcomed for the East African Bird Report which forms the third issue each year.

For sale: ***Annotated Checklist of the Birds of East Africa*** by Lester L. Short, Jennifer F.M. Horne and Cecilia Muringo-Gichuki will be available shortly through the Dept. Ornithology. The book provides a list of East African species in modern taxonomic order with a discussion of the taxonomy of each, the English name used and reasons why, and a brief up-to-date account of distribution and habitat. The book will cost KSh 700. A separate field checklist will be available at KSh 100. Orders can be placed with Cecilia Gichuki through the Department.

ICBP–Kenya offers for sale notelets (showing attractive pen and ink drawings by Dale Zimmerman), postcards (showing the endemic birds of Arabuko-Sokoke Forest in a painting by Norman Arlott) and T-shirts (with a Crowned Eagle motif by Simon Thomsett). These are available from the Department of Ornithology and the EANHS office. The proceeds go to bird conservation projects.

Contacts For ICBP-Kenya, Kenya Wetlands Working Group and the EANHS Nest Record Scheme, as well as queries concerning *Kenya Birds*, write to Department of Ornithology, National Museums of Kenya, P.O. Box 40658, Nairobi, or telephone 742131–4/742161–4 extension 243.

Kenya Birds, Volume 1, Number 2: December 1992

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION LIBRARIES
3 9088 00997 2977

Contents

Editorial ii
News from Kenya and abroad 25
Department of Ornithology 25
ICBP Kenya Section 29
EANHS OS-c 31
KWWG 32
International 34
Bird family profiles 2: Sunbirds 35
Birding in ... Nairobi National Park 37
Records and Notes 39
Threatened birds of Kenya 2: Hinde's Babbler 46
Identification first aid: Cisticolas in Nairobi National Park 48
Profile in Action: Fleur Ng'weno 50
Children's Section 51
Events and Announcements iii

Martial Eagle—*Simon Thomsett*